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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the “Old” (1920s–30s), “New” (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

The Platypus Review

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Look where we are

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The destiny of civilization

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completely denounced and hated by the Left. And yet, afterwards, when I read it, and had questions about it, it was like: we never had a chance. That’s why and when I joined the RCP, first as a supporter, then as a full member, not forgetting that it was a fully democratic-centralist organization. It was not a case of paying your subs and turning up when you want.

My experiences of politics before joining were minor. I was in the Labour Party; I was a trade-unionist; I was among, in the workplace, old trade-unionists. It was a traditional, working-class industry. Probably within six or seven miles, we’d got eight pits, and probably 16,000 men. So, quite parochial, necessarily so, because of the estates where you lived, the clubs, the pubs where you drank, the town centers where you shopped — you didn’t go out of town centers then — it was very much a working-class experience.

DM: What were your feelings about that? You weren’t trying to leave that community as quickly as possible, or anything like that; you were part of that community?

SR: Absolutely. It was a strange community for me, because I’d trained as an operating-theater technician in a hospital, amongst other things, and went to the pit — had to — and I found it quite a harsh place, though I only worked on the pit top. I wouldn’t say we were all entirely parochial at the time, but compared to today’s world, in essence it was quite narrow. We used to go on holidays abroad, but it was a parochial community. So absolutely no intentions, vision, or possibility of leaving it. We used to have an old saying: it’s not quite right, but it adds an essence to it. For most working-class lads and lasses, they trained the lasses to be seamstresses at the sewing factory, and the men to go to the pit or the power station.

DM: Regarding the transition from the International Socialists (IS) to the RCP — **SR:** The IS had become the RCP before I joined. I had contact for some years with people in the IS, and then the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG), the Revolutionary Communist Tendency (RCT), and then the Party as well, but they tended to be, obviously, Political Committee (PC) members; not secretive, but quite tight. But there was nothing hidden.

Party (SWP), the Militant Tendency — because, in my political naïveté, the job was to keep the union going, keep the strike going, and we couldn’t do with anything that was going to be a threat to that. So, I’d come across a lot on the Left — although not politically interested in them — saw what they did and didn’t do, looked at them after the strike, and found no answers as to (a) why we lost; (b) where we could go; and (c) what were the major issues. Why had my grandad lost? And his grandad lost? Why had the Left *always* lost? These were the questions in my mind, at a time when I shouldn’t have been concerning myself with them: we’d been through enough. But these are answers you have to find.

A guy that I worked with at the time, who was actually in the Workers’ Revolutionary Party (WRP), and had also joined the RCP, wouldn’t leave me alone.

DM: How old were you at this time?

SR: Mid-20s.

DM: With a young family?

SR: With two girls.

Like many, I’d been a fighter, we put ourselves through quite a lot: put in police cells numerous times, badly beaten up, went to jail for a few nights, at the time when Margaret Thatcher, who was in charge of the state at the time, was talking about the miners being treasonous to the state. When you’re sat in a jail, and the Prime Minister is telling the country that we are treasonous towards the state, it’s not the easiest thing to cope with as a young man.

Reading more literature from the RCP, particularly their reasoning of how the strike failed in an organizational-tactical way, all rang true — a lightbulb moment. It has to be remembered that they took a huge risk in the strike, considering that we had run that strike completely undemocratically — probably in ignorance of most of the members’ wishes — and they called for a ballot, where the rest of the Left were denouncing the RCP as Right-wing, supporters of the government, because we worked for the National Coal Board (NCB), The RCP, mid-strike, unbeknownst to me at the time, had taken a strongly political line.

SR: Loss of *everything*. Which means you either bury your head in the sand in different ways, buckle down, get on with it, devote yourself individually and personally to your family, to maybe your future, or you ask questions. I had to ask the question, why did we lose? And during that whole period, I was in the Labour Party, probably on the Right-wing of the Labour Party. I remember standing in many a union meeting and denouncing the Left — the Socialist Workers’ Party (SWP), the Militant Tendency — because, in my political naïveté, the job was to keep the union going, keep the strike going, and we couldn’t do with anything that was going to be a threat to that. So, I’d come across a lot on the Left — although not politically interested in them — saw what they did and didn’t do, looked at them after the strike, and found no answers as to (a) why we lost; (b) where we could go; and (c) what were the major issues. Why had my grandad lost? And his grandad lost? Why had the Left *always* lost? These were the questions in my mind, at a time when I shouldn’t have been concerning myself with them: we’d been through enough. But these are answers you have to find.

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Look where we are
An interview with Steve Roberts
Mike Atkinson and David Mountain

Steve Roberts: I joined in approximately 1986. More pertinently, it was after the miners’ strike (1984–85). With regards to the strike, let’s work backwards from the end, from the defeat, which was March 85, when we unfortunately went back up the pit lanes and started work again. It was a pivotal moment for a lot of us, particularly — and no disrespect to the lads who didn’t — those of us who were active. We were at it every day for 12 months: picketing, state repression upon us, collecting money, speeches, all activist activities. It meant a huge amount to all of us, so it was a sad day when we went back, even though we put our families and ourselves through quite a lot of hell: 12 months without money, it’s a struggle, apart from state repression. Why did I join the RCP? It wasn’t immediate. People had to recruit best, but you can only get knocked down so many times, and at the end of the day you look to the referee and you say, I’m done.

David Mountain: When did you join the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), and why? What were your experiences of politics before joining?

On May 14, 2022, Platypus Affiliated Society members Mike Atkinson and David Mountain interviewed Steve Roberts, a former member of the Revolutionary Communist Party (UK, 1978). An edited transcript follows.

after 1990, with Furedi admitting in “Midnight in the century” the death of working-class politics, etc.²⁴

SR: That’s a big one. It revolves around the Party disbanding. It happened during a period in which the world was changing: the meanings of “Left” and “Right” were collapsing, and it meant that things had to be approached — critiqued, almost — in a different way, and other conclusions drawn. The question is whether you lose sight of where you’ve come from.

Beyond the politics, it’s worth understanding that a lot of the members had had a life of struggle themselves. It was really tough to be a Revolutionary Communist member in the 80s and 90s, with not only the strength of all bourgeois ideology against you, but the entire Left as well, the labor movement. I was lucky, I had a family to lean on, but a lot of these guys were single, ex-students, some more mature, living in materially-difficult conditions. I have the utmost respect for all of them. But you can’t be a student revolutionary all your life. It’s not possible, especially considering the conditions. I do wonder, apart from the politics and the changes occurring, if that played a part. I wouldn’t be surprised, and I wouldn’t be disappointed if that was a factor in them going their own way; still carrying out political work right up to the present day — forming magazines, etc. — but I wouldn’t be surprised if the trauma of the personal and political responsibility they carried, was a factor in the Party disbanding.

The one thing that does worry me is this: if the conditions weren’t ripe then, when will they ever be ripe? I.e., what if whatever we tried to achieve — while, yes, we must admit we failed — *can’t* be achieved? I was out of it by then, but that’s a real concern. When do conditions of ripeness occur? If one of the main problems is the strength of bourgeois ideology among the working class, and the inability to form the proletarian vanguard, if we can’t do it with Marxist politics, what the hell can we do it with? Can we do it with a critique of “woke-ism” and identity politics? The whole thing is becoming twisted and myopic. Now we are looking at something else altogether here. Here is a quote from Furedi’s book *Politics of Fear* (2005):

In our era of political exhaustion, the challenge that faces us is essentially pre-political. It makes little sense to develop an ambitious political philosophy when the sense of human subjectivity exists in a diminished form. Politics represents the negation of Fate and its existence depends on the prevalence of the belief that what people do can make a difference. That is why today the challenge facing those interested in the reconstitution of public life is not the discovery of a Big Idea or the invention of a new political doctrine or philosophy. In the absence of a more robust sense of human agency that can act on such ideas, such doctrine would have a formal and platitudinous character.⁵

I should have heard alarm bells while reading this, and I didn’t, which is my failure and perhaps the failure of others, because what’s encompassed by Furedi’s words is more than a turn.

DM: Was the collapse of the Soviet Union a big moment for the RCP, and if so, why?

SR: It’s necessary to think about this in terms of international proletarian politics, or its failure. It appeared — and this is allegedly the reason the Party disbanded — that the ripeness no longer existed; working-class politics had been defeated ideologically and organizationally. Then we had the situation with the Soviet Union: the “end of history,” where capitalism was in its heyday again, and was going to solve the world’s problems. The RCP looked at the collapse of the USSR within that framework.

Yes, the fall of the Soviet Union was a big deal in world politics, but, also, in the trends that we’d identified over the years, perhaps not. We had tried to address the issue of Stalinism, and now we had it retreating on the international stage — and just by the forces of capitalism. It all had to be taken into account, and it happened in the latter stages of the RCP. What did the RCP, which I had left just before this moment, expect to happen? Probably exactly what has.

MA: If the RCP hadn’t died a premature death, how might things be different? What direction would you have liked to have seen it go in organizationally? You mentioned the idea of it being an educational project.

SR: A better way of asking this is, what could have happened if revolutionary politics had still been on the agenda? Revolutionary politics had left the stage: look where we are. If it had still been on the stage, would it have been different? We must believe it would have been different if it had still been present. If we don’t, we’re saying that the game’s up; it’ll never be possible; the conditions are never going to be ripe, we’ve failed in many ways in the past — including the RCP and the politics of Platypus to an extent, though not directly correlated. I’m sorry, but I can’t accept that the game’s up.

DM: Could you talk about the nuts and bolts of the RCP: the cadre-building, its democratic-centralist formation. Was that distinctly Leninist in its self-conception?

SR: Yes. We felt it every day in our practice, which was informed by our theory. I know that seems simplistic, but it’s everything put together. The Left hated us for the fact that we were on the streets, practicing it.

DM: What would you be doing every day for the RCP?

SR: Like everybody in Left-wing politics: paper- and magazine-selling. That was up to three times a week, standing outside student halls, market squares, the towns, etc. We didn’t care. We’d go wherever we felt the activity was. This is the strange thing about this “economism” and not-getting-your-hands-dirty-in-the-struggle crap that gets thrown about by the Left: they don’t grasp that there is no problem being where people are, but not politically. We would go anywhere that we thought had potential, but we

would not compromise our politics at any level. That was the main difference. We had intense reading groups. Books were being published that we all had to go through verbatim.

In terms of Ireland, we had the Irish Freedom Movement, and we liaised with people in Ireland. We organized marches, protests.

I remember being in a scary protest in North London. This was when the IRA was prepared to put bombs anywhere in England. Without being crude, that was their business. From our politics, we had to provide support. I remember we had one march in London, and, frankly, it was squeaky bum time.⁶ We had the National Front, completely lining our march, throwing bricks at us. Also, there were the police, *agents provocateurs*, likely from the state, and we put on one hell of a march, and a loud one.

DM: The Irish Freedom Movement was like a front group?

SR: Yes. We had no problem in giving an organizational form to our politics. We didn’t mind getting our hands dirty in the struggle. We didn’t even mind who tagged along. As long as we were in charge — the politics came first. We’d bus people in from all over the UK. We set up another so-called “front organization”: Workers Against Racism.

DM: Why do you say “so-called”?

SR: Because the Right, and even the Left, tends to use “front organizations” as a slight, as if you’re hiding your politics. Never happened with us.

Racism was a major problem in the UK, and the most racist thing we had to deal with were the immigration laws of the British state. Our politics was helpful in that respect. But also, on a day-to-day level, it meant that people were getting expelled from the country, so we had to organize to protest that. It didn’t mean going to lawyers, trying to get the middle class to provide a sympathy vote. We’d turn up *en masse* outside embassies, and change things. Immigrant communities, e.g., second-generation Pakistani communities were literally getting firebombed in their own houses. Serious, physical racism. We used to go into those communities, into their houses, and we defended them. This was serious politics. Anybody who tries to tell you that the RCP was an abstract, ideological, dogmatic Marxist party: bullshit. Quite the opposite. We had our own conference — “Preparing for Power,” we used to call it. We did a lot for a small organization. Perhaps too much.

DM: I still struggle to understand how that squared with the RCP’s prognosis of, for example, the failure of the miners’ strike, against someone like Arthur Scargill, who founded a socialist party around the time of New Labour, to carry on the tradition of what you’d call the Stalinist, reformist tradition, but dressed up in radical clothes. There seems to be a gap between this energetic activism, and a pessimistic, square-faced look at the reality of the political situation at a time of the failure of the Left.

SR: I get what you’re saying. It comes back to the question, what is to be done? I don’t just mean the pamphlet we all know. Do we tail the radical Left-wing of Labourism, like Scargill, and others follow? Do we take the opportunistic route of the SWP; the Stalinists in all their various forms; or do we do what’s necessary? We did what was necessary. I don’t see a contradiction there, because why would there be? Just because we couldn’t and didn’t often see results? If it’s about seeing results, you are effectively saying, “it’s not going to happen.”

We thought, what had to be done had to be done, whatever the conditions. Yes, we understood that there were major ideological and organizational problems within the working class, and yes, we would take it on, full frontal, along with the state: it had to be done. We had to give expression to the theory.

Not so long ago, I had it said to me that there was a conversation within the Party: despite the importance of the Party and the necessity of a vanguard, were we taking on too much? E.g., Platypus has no intentions at the moment of forming a party. I understand that there’s a danger — regardless of theoretical and organizational correctness and discipline — of getting sucked into reformism and bourgeois ideology. That question hasn’t ever been resolved, even on the revolutionary Left.

Remember, we are talking pre-internet. How else could you build a vanguard? You had to have activity. Today is different.

DM: Selling the newspaper outside of the student halls of residence, you learn quickly how to talk to all sorts of people. Now, without that practice, it takes longer to learn how to talk to people, especially when they have different views.

SR: Yes, there are pluses and minuses. But we couldn’t choose. I know it seems a very technical, absurd, way of looking at it, but we had to operate within the conditions that we found ourselves in.

DM: During the miners’ strike, the RCP was criticized for lacking solidarity, right? In the 90s, with New Labour, Scargill goes back to basics, from his point of view, and the RCP folds. Those two moments of the miners’ strike and New Labour seem important to the RCP and Scargill, while they had different positions in both cases.

SR: Bluntly, you can be a reformist radical any time you want. It’s the easiest, laziest comfort zone. It’s a stage in front of Corbynista morality and looking after the poor, but not much. The challenge is to do what’s necessary. In everyday terms: you would have no problem, in those days, and not so many years before today, walking into any working-class organization or social gathering, and talking like Scargill does. He’d bring the house down. Seriously, it’s easy politics.

The differentiation in the strike was not just the call for the ballot that Furedi urged the Party to take on — a contentious, massive thing. There’s a 12-month strike where Thatcher and the state are pushing people back to work because it was an undemocratic strike — and it was — and there’s

a crisis for marxists, too

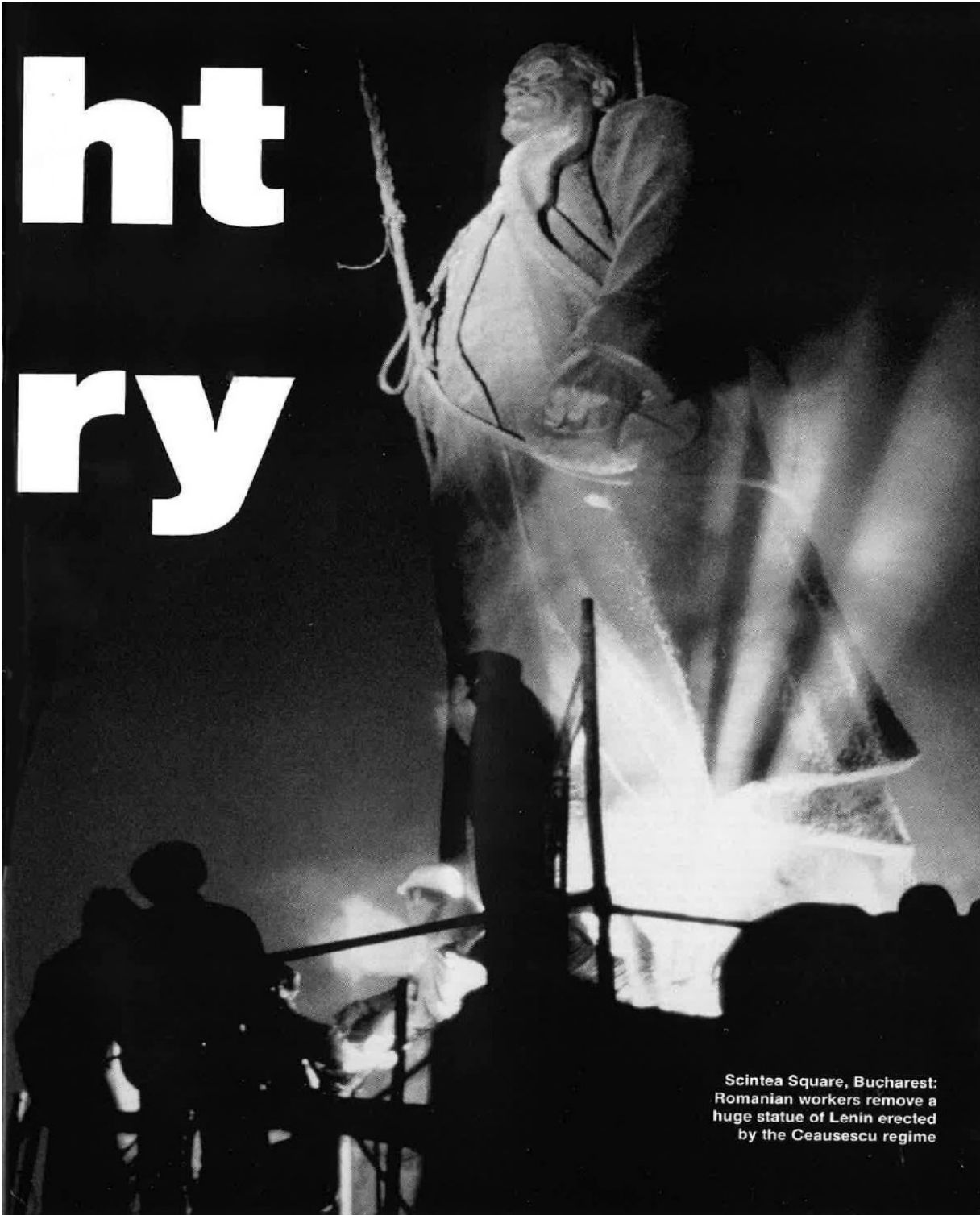
Midnight in the century

Frank Richards takes a hard look at the unprecedented problems facing Marxists in today’s dark age, and points towards a possible way to speed the dawn

There are no historical precedents for the situation facing Marxists in the 1990s. For the first time this century there is no real sense of a working class movement with a distinctive political identity anywhere in the world. The collapse of Stalinism in the East, and the defeats of Labourism and its variants in the West, have seen to that. Not only has Marxism been discredited, but so too has any notion of a collective solution to the problems of capitalist society. Thus the capitalist class, despite all the difficulties facing its system in the current economic recession, is now more confident of its ability to rule than at any time since the challenge of labour first emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. The apparently universal consensus that the market system offers the only conceivable method of organising society reflects the ascendancy of capitalist ideology. These are pessimistic times, in which low expectations have become common sense. A lack of confidence about the future is experienced as fear about the present. Concepts like change, progress and social

transformation have acquired negative connotations. The political spectrum has narrowed; what used to be the centre now constitutes the left. And what has happened to those who identified with traditions such as Marxism, socialism, or communism? Nothing left The left, as a force that represents something in society, no longer exists. To be sure, a fair few individual left-wing activists have survived the events of the past decade. They are invariably refugees from the past with no political connections to the present. That is why their activities resemble the politics of exile. An inordinate amount of time is devoted to inventing new names and new images. Every communist party attached to the old Stalinist movement is experimenting with a new name. Other left-wing veterans are looking for new ideas to reinforce their eroding sense of political identity. There are half-hearted attempts to pick up on issues such as environmentalism, to project a sensible and inoffensive image. The

more radical activists are waiting for the sort of class struggles which occurred in the seventies to make a comeback, in the hope that their day will come. The decline and defeat of the left is often blamed on real changes in the way that society works and the lives which people lead. The word ‘post’ has become a regular prefix used to substantiate this idea of objective change: ‘post-industrial’, ‘post-Fordist’, ‘postmodern’, to name a few. In Britain the left produced the theory of Thatcherism to show how changing material circumstances led to the ascendancy of the right. Yet the multiplicity of these explanations based on objective circumstances calls into question their arguments. It is far from clear why change as such should always benefit one side and not the other. And if the issue was so self-evident, there would surely be no need for so many conflicting points of view. It seems to us that the attempt to hold the decline of the cloth-capped proletariat, or the growth of information technology and the service sector, responsible for the



Scintea Square, Bucharest: Romanian workers remove a huge statue of Lenin erected by the Ceausescu regime

Furedi, calling for the RCP to demand a ballot. That takes a level of bravery, as well as being regarded as necessary.

The good thing about Scargill is that he was a genuine, working-class fighter. Just imbued from top-to-bottom with radical Labourist, possibly Stalinist, politics. Nonetheless, he wasn't the type of working-class leader to be shaking hands with the Prime Minister. With Scargill's intention to fight — and we did most of the fighting — there was no question over his personality. The problem was his politics. His politics informed the National Union of Miners, and his proposal, which we tried to argue during the strike, is that we, the workers, along with the management, could make "our" industry more profitable to compete with foreign imports, etc. He was a *Labourist* Left-wing activist, and that's the difference.

MA: How do you understand the relationship between the RCP in its day, perhaps factoring in what could be described as the pivotal turn in the 1990s, and *Spiked* today? Is there a red thread?

SR: I've come to the conclusion that there were two traditions. There was a tradition of a democratic-centralist party steeped in proletarian politics up to it being disbanded. The personnel involved continued into *Spiked*, Academy of Ideas, etc., and some went their own ways individually. Then there was a tradition of those that had never been in that democratic-centralist party, but were pulled towards *Spiked* and other organizations, but didn't have — without being too rude and disrespectful — the full understanding of the original tradition, and the tendency towards the turn. It was all about the turn.

Concerning a red thread; it's inevitable, because the main leading organizers of these organizations and publications today were all in the RCP. We carry that with us, which is an advantage and a disadvantage. It means that you can speak the language. You can appear to still be a revolutionary communist operating within choppy waters, so we have to "temper our language," or "appeal to a different audience," but we're still revolutionary communists. That's the disadvantage. It can cause problems: it's difficult to not just win the argument, but also to isolate what's going on. Has there been a turn? Are things just being delayed? Or is it something worse and bigger?

If you talk to people in the street, you can speak openly and objectively, with no dead weight on your shoulders and they've got none on theirs. It's an open and clear relationship where things get clarified. Try having that with not just Leftists outside of the RCP, but with people you've worked and lived with in a revolutionary party. These are difficult things to get over, because it can appear that you're insulting them personally, when it's the politics that matters, not the personalities.

I'm having serious issues and doubts now, and I don't see them changing, with how things are turning out. I've been absolutely disgusted with, e.g., the approach that *Spiked* has taken over Ukraine. They're still very good on individualism per se, free speech.

I've been having *tête-à-têtes* and discussions — sometimes I've just been completely blanked — with a well-read, intelligent guy. I was questioning the position over Ukraine, as well as *Spiked*, which still has the red thread, but sees everything through a cultural prism: it's become obsessively anti-Leftist, in being anti-middle class, anti-"woke" Leftism. I find that disturbing; more than a turn. I wrote this in a Facebook post. The reply I received was as follows: "Our [the RCP's] tradition comes from the progressive gains of Western values. Nothing new in reiterating this. This benchmark is one that has taken on a greater significance, and the politicization of culture is not of our making either." That's a defensive position to take. It highlights that while there's still that red thread coming from that person, he knows that I know that he knows that I know . . . Because you could say that Platypus also wants the progressive gains of Western values, and the bourgeois revolution that essentially failed. You could read that into that. And it's correct, that the politicization of culture is not of our making. But you could also read something very different from that statement: a turn away from our original tradition, which was about the dictatorship of the proletariat towards socialism, and if we got there, we could regain some of the good in the Enlightenment and Western values, but not within capitalism. That response encompasses the problems of having a discussion with someone who's still got a red thread, and in good faith. To follow that, this is from an interview that Platypus did with Brendan O'Neill in 2018. Chris Mansour, who conducted the interview, asked about the question of "Western values," and this obsession with trying to regain them, at the expense of everything else. O'Neill remarked:

[T]he Left was the highpoint of human politics thus far: *The Left is finished as a social force*. We are witnessing the death throes of it. It is a zombie idea, a zombie institution. It failed, it did not work.

It never lived up to its promise and every place in which it was tried, it was neither good nor convincing enough. Consequently, over time, it is dying. We should let it die.⁷

We could agree with much of that. But the point is not simply to accept the status quo, but what is to be done about it? What is the Left to be replaced with?

O'Neill was asked whether Enlightenment values could be regained within capitalism, which, in the orthodox Marxist understanding, is not possible. He remarked:

The argument that these values are impossible under capitalism and will only be fulfilled by revolution is used by radicals as an excuse that allows them to wallow in the comfort of this impossibility at a time when the prospects of revolution are virtually zero. It is a deflection from the true battle of our moment: The bourgeoisie has lost faith in itself and its founding values. The role of radicals in such a period is to help the bourgeoisie recover a sense of itself, because in losing faith in its founding values everyone suffers as a result. So long as these bourgeois values are still under attack, this is the task of anyone who is serious about liberating mankind from poverty and tyranny.⁸

That's extremely worrying. He seems to be suggesting that the focus has to be exclusively on regaining Enlightenment values, because there's no possibility of revolution. It's undeniable that O'Neill, who has been the editor of *Spiked* and has done good work for years, has that red thread. He was a member of the RCP, to highlight the difficulty. I see his comments as so far removed from the tradition, that it's astounding. That language is exactly what Furedi has used in his position that he has either led or has agreed with over Ukraine: he says, we must support Ukraine and the West, because we need to restore Western values; a moral rearmament is necessary. I'm flabbergasted by such language. A "moral rearmament," by arming a war? Taking sides with your own ruling class, who's arming another nation? I'm starting to be completely lost.

MA: The RCP's activity around Ireland had its sights set on the dictatorship of the proletariat, whereas today the question of self-determination may be related to simply defending the nation state, without that element of Marxism, without the element of revolution. I.e., the revolution's dead, so just defend the nation state.

SR: Absolutely. Yes. It's astounding and, to be honest, frightening.

DM: What do you think the correct position on Ukraine is?

SR: As you probably have, I've been listening to various Right-wing, Left-wing, and centrist views on Ukraine. The amount of reasons, excuses, or justifications is mind-blowing.

For me, it's clear — and people might say, "You're just taking an abstract position; there's a war going on; you don't want to get your hands dirty in the struggle; you must take a position." That's thrown at me all the time. Today, to be an absolute realist, no matter what position that any of us takes, we can have absolutely zero influence. There is no Left. There is no movement. There's nothing that can put pressure even on our own elites. In that respect, any "position" is really just about us. We're not in a position to affect the world. The question becomes, what do we think the position ought to be?

On self-determination: the Right talks about freedom and democracy, and we ignore their hypocrisy with what they've done around the world throughout capitalist history. But for the Left to use self-determination, sovereignty as a justification to take the position of fully supporting your own ruling class in a war where Ukrainians and Russians are getting slaughtered is absolutely reactionary. Our enemy is, for us, as an international position, our indigenous ruling class. We can affect things within a nation state, and not try to stop a war, or have an influence, by challenging and refusing to go along with one's own ruling elites.

Of course, we get the simplification thrown back at us then, that "there is a war; which side are you on? People are going to die." But until we make a revolution, until we achieve the international dictatorship of the proletariat, there's going to be barbarism, and that's not being abstract or remote. We only have so much time and effort, each of us, to do something; it's what we do with it that matters.

DM: I wanted to ask for your view on the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by the state, and the jump to the lockdown.

SR: My thoughts have largely been determined by Brexit, COVID, and Ukraine. COVID is defining for me. I took a position, almost within days of the whole thing blowing up after the scenes that we all saw in China and Italy: it was a sure sign that, internationally, the ruling class has lost its mind, and is incapable of dealing with an existential crisis in any rational, proportionate

way. It's even been prepared to shut down capitalist society, globally, for two years. If that's not madness, I don't know what is. Again, these people are not as astute as their predecessors. It was like a snowball that just rolled on and on. It's necessary to question the range of policies that were taken, what's happened since, and how the state has now — not in a cynical, conspiratorial way — started to reorder society. So, I was entirely against everything that happened, the whole project itself. It set a lot of alarm bells going in my old milieu, where there was either silence or hardly any kickback against the whole episode. In fairness to *Spiked*, periodically, but not enough, they did publish a lot of dissenting epidemiologists in the early days, in addition to one brave article that talked about the NHS having emptied all its beds of old people, sending 20–30 thousand of them to their deaths in care homes. State carnage. Afterwards, I found much more disagreement with positions they took over the entire vaccination program. COVID for me was quite defining, and there was not a class response as there ought to have been.

DM: Could you say anything about your departure from the RCP, and about your experience of the RCP as a miner, as a working-class person, in contrast to a more student-based, intellectual majority?

SR: This is cathartic for me.

I want to make it clear that my departure had nothing to do with politics or the personnel. I had no questions, no doubts, that the RCP was doing and did the right thing, possibly almost up to it being disbanded.

Perhaps it was a personal character failure on my part, not to be able to see it through. It was very demanding, although, in fairness, the Party was accommodating, they knew I had family, etc. I wasn't unnecessarily pushed, as opposed to students or postgraduates. Maybe this will seem like excuses, but I did have two young girls; I had been through the strike, through a destructive period in my life; luckily, I had found something else in the RCP.

After the strike, as destructive as it was, I found two pieces of granite: my wife — we've been married 46 years now — and the RCP. Seriously. But no man is an island. I found it particularly tough back at work. I found myself arguing more with the union than with the pit manager; there was an awful lot happening; I was only attending two or three days a week. There was a life to rebuild, and I was probably unemployable, which is how I was politically. I did leave the pit not long after the strike, maybe 12 months or two years afterwards, because I had another dispute. I was going to have to ask the men to go on strike to support the dispute I had, and I didn't have the heart to ask the lads. I left with a choice. Myself and another colleague at the pit walked away from it, despite the difficulties we were in.

At that time, and even prior to the strike, the NCB divided people by offering large redundancy payments, some of the biggest in that period, to older men near retirement age, among some others, for various reasons. Some of the lads at the pit knew what I intended to do. The story went, I was told, that they went to see the union — who colluded all the time with the management about who would get the redundancy payment — and they said, tell him to come back to the pit and he'll get his redundancy money. I told them to shove it up their arse. I had to walk away with my conscience clear, with no money in the bank. I'm not playing a hero here, but you have to live with yourself. I told my wife, and she agreed. I had to be able to walk into that club, and in that town, and not have somebody say to me, "seven pieces of silver."

As regards the social aspect — a working-class lad in a revolutionary party that's mostly full of students, postgraduates, more mature people, very well-educated; it was different, but I never felt out of place. It was great.

DM: Would you have called yourself a rank-and-file member?

SR: If anything, and I'm not being self-deprecating here, at an intellectual level, I wasn't where a lot of them were, but I was never made to feel that — in fact, they spent a lot of time educating me — but I would have considered myself a foot soldier rather than a lieutenant, nevermind a general. It was never problematic.

That's one of the beauties of a democratic-centralist party: personal differences get absorbed into the project. It doesn't matter. It's not like we were all best buddies. Probably some of them hated my guts, and maybe I hated one or two of them. It didn't matter a damn. When you were selling that paper, or out on that march, you were an RCP member, and it meant a lot. It gave you confidence, safety in numbers, etc. It's really important.

This is what reformists and the Democratic Socialists of America, and all the hangers-on, don't get: if you don't prepare yourself for what's

going to be thrown at you, you're going to go under. The state or others will get you, the project will collapse, and the working class will go with it. You have to have a revolutionary-communist vanguard party at some point. I remember years ago, in my naïveté, saying in a branch meeting, "but there'll be *agents provocateurs*!" And do you know the answer I got back? "Absolutely, more than likely, and we can't stop them doing that, but we can ensure that, when they come and do our work, there are no malingerers, no easy options: they will be doing *our* job for us!"

DM: Could you talk about the subjective experience of being in the Party? The sense of solidarity, because when you talk about the Party it almost sounds like you all lived in the same house, like a commune. I'm interested in the more mundane but still important aspects of everyday life in the Party.

SR: We had three branches in West Yorkshire, and I was in the Pontefract branch. We had Wakefield and Leeds as well; small in numbers, but we punched above our weight. When you speak as I do, as if it's a commonplace, normal thing — a democratic-centralist party — I suppose it does give the impression of a sect, almost a hippie-like commune, and nothing could be further from the truth. The thing that bound us together, from the different walks of life, was the politics, including the political differentiation from everyone else. Few of us lived near each other. We didn't socialize much together, although most of our social life was politics. It was, seriously, on the one hand a very normal life — I led my family life, I had responsibilities to the Party — but it did dominate our lives at the same time. It was a commitment. But nobody forced us to do it.

DM: You mentioned the power of solidarity, of being in the same group that stems from a Leninist form of organization.

SR: Yes, a lot of it is to do with that form of Leninist organization. I also sensed the same thing in the strike, which had nothing to do with the dictatorship of the proletariat, or a Leninist party. It's about working-class, proletarian struggle. In the strike, like myself, there were a lot of young men, who had never been involved in anything politically. And yet, there's something that comes to the fore in that struggle that binds you together. That is a genuine sense of camaraderie; not one that you can write down and study. It's an experience: good, bad, questioning experiences, but all experiences and struggles. That struggle was against our employer, which was the state. It never got politicized to that extent. But that became the struggle. The struggle became, as we used to say at the time, one of defending our communities, our lives, our jobs. You could say that we were lucky that our employer was the state. I was prepared to take the state down as far as it would go, to force it to get off our backs, to get out of our communities, and to demand our jobs.

From people who have never struggled or been involved politically at all in the past, it's amazing. I was in my early-to-mid-20s, and I remember seeing young kids, and all they knew was nightclubs, boozing, and going to the pit 12 hours a day to earn a lot of money because they used a lot of hours. But they were out on that picket line; they forgot everything else and got on with it: they were taking hammer-blows from the police, broken skulls, broken legs. That comes from proletarian struggle in all sorts of forms. The task is to get beyond what we term "working-class consciousness."

It's worthwhile keeping this in mind: if that task is not necessary, why has there not been a revolution before now? The working class has fought for generations and never got anywhere. There's an aspect that's missing. The working class doesn't need to be told how to fight. The problem is, they're fighting on a narrow level. So that task has not changed: that's our task, which is why I'm so dismayed with this garbage about a "moral rearmament of bourgeois values." Not what I'm about at 65 years old, I'm afraid. **IP**

¹ Mike Macnair, Bryan Palmer, Richard Rubin, Jason Wright, "The legacy of Trotskyism" (April 30, 2011), the transcript of which can be found in *Platypus Review* 38 (August 2011), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2011/08/05/the-legacy-of-trotskyism-2/>.

² See Owen Jones, "Peter Hitchens got me thinking: do lefties always have to turn right in old age?," *The Guardian*, September 9, 2015, available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/09/peter-hitchens-tory-trotskyite-left-right>.

³ Mike Freeman, "'Self-activity' makes you blind: A reply to Alex Callinicos and the Socialist Workers Party," *Revolutionary Communist Papers* 7 (July 1981): 26.

⁴ Frank Richards (Furedi), "Midnight in the century," *Living Marxism* 26 (December 1990): 34–37.

⁵ Frank Furedi, *Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 166.

⁶ A tense, exciting part of a sporting event.

⁷ Chris Mansour, "Back to Enlightenment values: An interview with Brendan O'Neill," *Platypus Review* 103 (February 2018), available online at <https://platypus1917.org/2018/02/03/back-enlightenment-values-interview-brendan-oneill/>.

⁸ Ibid.

There was an organization within the IS (which later became the SWP), a Revolutionary Opposition (RO). They were against Stalinism in various forms; blind activism — the RCG undertook blind activism against Alex Callinicos of the SWP sometime after. They were against opportunism, economism, tailing the bourgeoisie, the working class, or the trade-union movement. That opposition existed within the IS. They were about party-building, political clarification, a statement of Marxism that I think at this moment — and I don’t know a great deal about Platypus — resembles some of the principles that Platypus holds about Marxism. They also were aware that the tradition of Marxism in the British working class had never been that strong for various historical reasons. They pursued that line of theory, including the necessity of a vanguard, which they didn’t see as just an organization of the best elements of the working class; it wasn’t as crude as that. There were two aspects: the leading elements of the proletariat, but on a more hegemonic, rather than identitarian, level. That led to a split from the IS into the RCG.

Not long after, it was alleged by the minority, the RCT, that the majority of the PC of the RCG tried to use organizational-technical methods to resolve what were serious political differences, even though they’d already split from the IS, which the RCT regarded as a retreat from the RCG’s founding principles toward a chauvinistic attitude. It came to a head over South Africa and the positions that the majority took towards the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), the Stalinists. The majority in the RCG wanted to enter the CPGB and split it asunder over the South African situation and the Troops Out Movement regarding Ireland.

At that point, we get another split. There were three expulsions from the RCG of about half of its members, who formed the RCT, which was the forerunner to the RCP. The RCT was a return to the RCG’s original principles, and it still regarded Stalinism within the British working class and the domestic and international organizations of the Left as the dominant opportunist tendency: the trade unions, Labour Party, the relationship to the state, the relationship to the Soviet Union, the Comintern, etc.

DM: Did you call yourselves Trotskyists?

SR: That’s the million-dollar question. What is Trotskyism? Does it mean that you read Trotsky and you love his anti-Stalinism? Or his attachment to Lenin? You agree about his party-building, and you love that he was a great agitator and polemicist? Does that make you a Trotskyist? To give an example: there’s an English writer who calls himself a conservative Gaullist today, hates his own Conservative Party, but openly admits that he was a Trotskyist in his university days, but ended up in some other place. Many ex-Labour Party leaders — e.g., Jack Straw — regarded themselves as Trotskyists. The Militant Tendency was a Trotskyist organization within the Labour Party. The RCP were probably considered, however they thought of themselves, as Trotskyists. So, are we all Trotskyists? I’m not avoiding the question. Platypus did a panel in 2011 about Trotskyism that included the CPGB (Mike Macnair) and others.¹ It’s a big question. I’m not sure I’ve got the wherewithal to answer it.

DM: Was it a word that you used in the 80s for yourself or other groups?

SR: Both, for the reasons I’ve just outlined, from Peter Hitchens² to the RCP; they related to themselves as Trotskyists, as we have done, and other people such as anarchists tried to *slander* us as Trotskyists. It’s too much of an open question. I will quote a statement:

Our position is straightforward. Trade union struggles do not “revolutionise” workers; they do not lead workers to question “other aspects” of capitalist domination. Rather, it is only when workers support the oppressed against the British state that they begin to develop a broad working class consciousness. Directing workers’ struggles in this anti-capitalist direction is the only way to save jobs, maintain wages *and* conditions and defend the oppressed. It is also the way to pull the most class-conscious workers towards a party that can lead workers’ “partial struggles” beyond the narrow limits of trade unionism and towards the overthrow of capitalism.³

Mike Atkinson: What was the attitude of the RCP to the British state at the time, and how did that compare to the rest of the Left? This involves the notions of national self-determination and anti-imperialism.

SR: Understanding it through those two categories is simplistic, too dogmatic, not really Marxian. It’s a party line, easy politics. That’s the position that many of those who were once in the RCP are now taking over Ukraine: Ukraine’s self-determination. Those things affect the nationalism of the bourgeoisie and the working class, the relationship between them, and the state; they relate to a genuine proletarian internationalism.

With regards the attitude of the RCP to the state, you have to look at not the party line, but how our politics informed our practice.

Ireland was *the* big historical question of the day: the British state, the United Kingdom, had artificially created its own Northern Irish population. In the 70s and 80s, it came up against a liberation struggle that refused to accept British oppression. The military wing of the struggle was the Irish Republican Army (IRA); its political wing was the Sinn Féin. It’s colloquially called “The Troubles” now. It was a war. The British army was occupying a part of the British state. Members of the IRA, Sinn Féin, and the huge community around it fought the British state. This was one of the major issues of the day for anybody who wanted to progress proletarian politics, because it approached one’s relationship to the state, and it questioned the oppressed, the oppressors, of both classes. It differentiated dramatically the position of the RCP from anyone else in British politics. The SWP considered it a low priority, which says a great deal about the difference between sections of the Left and the RCP.

MA: One of the major points of distinction for the RCP was its attitude to tailing the Labour Party. How did that compare to the rest of the Left?

SR: Completely distinct. Our theory informed our practice. The Labour Party was intrinsically tied to the British state. Its tentacles worked within the working class, the trade-union movement, and other organizations, and we could have no truck with that or the capitalist British state. The rest of the Left always ended up — especially in periods of electoral activity, general elections, etc. — tailing the Labour Party. The SWP and other “Trotskyist” tendencies told the working class, through its members in trade unions and elsewhere, “vote Labour with no illusions.” Their slogan says so much, and it’s where we still are today: Corbynism and the rest of the people that call themselves the “revolutionary Left.” It comes down to that simple thing. Our refusal completely differentiated us. It’s one of the main reasons that the RCP was hated by the Left: we took very distinct positions. Not just to be antagonistic, but because our politics, our Marxist understanding that it was necessary to have a vanguard party to push towards the dictatorship of the proletariat and to overcome capitalism, meant that we had to do these things. The alternative was to become economicist, opportunistic, and tail.

Yet today we have Frank Furedi, a founder of the RCP, who’s written a number of books about the nation state and its democratic, political necessity. I disagree: the state is a geographical boundary where we can operate in a political space. That’s it. Furedi tends towards the economicist, opportunist line, when he sees the aim of the state as the defense of bourgeois values. That’s a change from seeing the state as *the enemy*, to saying that the nation state needs to be defended against globalism or the EU.

DM: With regards to Irish republicanism, was there not a tension between *national* self-determination and anti-statism within the RCP?

SR: Of course, but the two were tied together. It wasn’t a selfish thing for the RCP that we needed to do within the United Kingdom for working-class politics. For the Irish, it was a question of their self-determination: for them to have their self-determination within Ireland, we had to be anti-imperialist. That meant our state.

MA: Is Furedi’s position these days a vulgarization of that? I.e., the question of national self-determination understood in relation to working-class politics reduced simply to a defense of the bourgeois state as a principle.

SR: That’s fair, and it’s open to debate. We see such debate today regarding Ukraine: self-determination and anti-imperialism can mean all things to all men to suit all purposes. That’s not why we did it.

DM: We’ve talked about the RCP in its relationship to trade unionism. The other side of the Left in the 1970s–80s is the new social movements (NSMs) as we might call them now, e.g., questions around liberation, etc. What did “liberation” mean for the RCP in the 70s–80s, and what was the relationship between the RCP and the New Left, including its associated aspects such as counterculture, i.e., the so-called social revolution of the mid-20th century?

SR: On “liberation,” I revert back to the Party’s critique of bourgeois society and the Left. “Liberation” for us simply meant the dictatorship of the proletariat towards socialism. I know that’s a catch-all phrase, but that “liberation” is what freedom was: freedom, in those broad political terms, not to be narrowed down into social groups, nor to be found by turning lazily towards Third World movements where there appear to be “socialist” or “liberations” movements, governments, etc.

Regarding the New Left, I can’t stress enough that, up to the Party disbanding in 1996, we were hated. We had no attachment to the Left, its new movements, and the bourgeois institutions and the states with which it associated itself. E.g., we had our own political program, but we never demanded that the Irish liberation struggle, be it Sinn Féin or the IRA, take on our entire political program in return for support. That wasn’t our business. Our business was to support *their* liberation struggle, and we had our purpose as well as supporting theirs. We were contrary to the opportunism of the New Left and the NSMs.

DM: Some of the positions taken by the RCP could be described as being proto-“woke,” e.g., the critique of Victorian morality. It’s interesting that the RCP in its heyday seemed to be at the vanguard of ideas of sexual liberation, among other issues.

SR: They’re issues we didn’t shy away from. We felt that, not on a sociological, but a socio-political level, they needed to be addressed. E.g., the AIDS crisis: moral panics. We had to address those situations because they were becoming, while not dominant, relevant to sections of society, as well as how the bourgeoisie, specifically the political class of the time, were using these issues. The political class, the capitalist class, were more astute, had a better understanding of, and could better manipulate politics than they are today, because they had a working class to worry about, which they don’t have now. In those situations, you can’t on the one hand claim that, soon after, *Living Marxism* (*LM*) — and *Spiked* later on — were prescient in understanding the turns taking place in society, and, on the other hand, grumble that, ten years earlier, we addressed them. These things were happening. We were never dogmatic, in the sense of stating, “we don’t get involved in *cultural* matters.” What’s happening now is a different matter that needs further discussion. It’s almost a “cultural turn,” seeing *everything* through the prism of culture, which is problematic. The ruling class at that time used things in a much more obvious way.

DM: Do you mean that the ruling class couldn’t take their power for granted?

SR: Yes. In terms of how close we were to the dictatorship of the proletariat, the working class was *never* a threat to the ruling class. Nonetheless, while sections of the ruling class are not Marxist, they understand, on a day-to-day basis — especially the political class that operates the state for them — that there *is* a bulwark against, at least, laissez-faire capitalism, a working-class threat. Not to be nostalgic about this, but if you look back at previous, particularly Tory, leaders, they are of a different class of people to the present ones, who, today, are essentially technical managers: all go to the same university, take the same courses, and they’ve had no pressure from the working class for decades. They are not Margaret Thatcher, who had to take account of the working class. As much as we know it was a million miles away from where we revolutionary communists would like to be, the ruling class perceived it differently.

DM: This question might be complicated by the fact that you were radicalized in the miners’ strike, but we’re interested to hear *your* perspective, and not that of the official RCP history: how did you understand “Thatcherism”? How did you understand Left anti-Thatcherism, and did your position on and understanding of these things change over the course of the 80s?

SR: “Thatcherism,” the “Third Way” of Blair, all these “-isms,” what are they? You could go as far as “neoliberalism” — not to dismiss “capitalism,” that’s a different thing — “globalism”; they’re all “-isms.”

For the Left, it became personalized. The way they approached Thatcher was very much in the old Labourist tradition, even from the so-called “revolutionary Left.” To them, socialism and the working class were moral issues. It was about the greedy bankers, the parasites in the city — which, obviously, for the Left, means that we need the advanced proletariat to tell us poor souls how we should oppose these people, and how they’re the problem. This found its nadir in “Thatcherism,” especially after the miners’ strike, because she was at the head of the state. She was part of a class that prepared to defeat us and damn well did. So, for us, certainly for me, it wasn’t an “-ism”; it was just how the ruling class attacked the working class, as capital always does. Now we don’t have a Thatcher, but we still have capital attacking the working class. The form that it takes is always different, but you can’t veer away from the wage-labor capitalist situation. “Thatcherism” was basically nothing, for me, even though she was the woman in charge talking about treason while I was sat in Armley Prison. I also understood, shortly after the strike, that she was just, as they all are, the personification of capital. So, no big deal.

DM: Do you not think that capitalism was changing a bit with Thatcherism, with the move towards laissez-faire capitalism, away from the New Deal, welfare-state era?

SR: That’s how the Left approached it, with the idea that there was a distinct change that then developed into neoliberalism, globalism, etc.

DM: And you think it’s been overstated?

SR: It’s been completely overegged. Worse than that, it’s been misunderstood. We have to respond to capitalism’s different forms in different eras, because it affects us in an uneven way, especially between advanced and undeveloped nations, i.e., uneven development and how capital moves between both. We can’t let slip what it is.

MA: What brought about the formation of the journal *Living Marxism*, and why was it “living”?

SR: It’s self-explanatory: to keep it alive. It started while we still had the Party, but things were changing within the Party. I’d left the Party in the early 90s, so I wasn’t privy to PC decisions or what was happening at a party level, although I knew people. It was a democratic-centralist organization, and it’s tight and it damn well should be. But if people read the RCP’s magazine, and then *LM* afterwards, trends were changing — as referenced by the question around the moral panics and the turn towards cultural aspects. It addressed those more broadly, in contrast with the accusation — often leveled at us — that we were dogmatically Marxist about class politics, so it became a mixture. Perhaps it was the start of the trend towards the dissolution of the Party, and *LM* carried on from there. But, in fairness, politically, there was not a great deal of change. If anyone reads *LM*, even in each cultural or political section, there was not a major turn or retreat away from the tradition.

MA: You’ve already described how the RCP distinguished itself specifically from the Left and the Left’s relationship to the Labour Party. How did it distinguish itself from Stalinism?

SR: Stalinism took many forms. So, you’d have to ask, how did it address the Soviet Union? Books were brought out; magazines were published. Our theoretical understanding of the Soviet Union fed into our political practice, often referring to the state particularly.

Going back to the RCG and the Tendency — it was the split in the RCG, and the attention it gave to the Stalinist CPGB, that eventually led to the Tendency and the Party forming. Stalinism was always a major problem, politically, that we had to address. It wasn’t a side issue.

MA: How do you understand “Stalinism”? What exactly does it refer to, whether on the Left itself in Britain, or in the Soviet Union; what is Stalinism distinct from Marxism in your understanding? I am interested more in your understanding here than the RCP’s.

SR: It is such a broad question, and especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when things changed again.

DM: Even though you’d left the RCP by the early 90s, you must have still be in the milieu, and one of the striking things about the RCP and *LM* is their early critique of political correctness, being the group who puts that on the public agenda, because it foreshadows the “culture wars.” What stands out is the question of “risk aversion”; the RCP was one of the only groups that had a consistent critique of the “risk-averse” society that we live in.

SR: This is a crucial point. It’s still debated today, whether it was a major turn, a tactical turn, a retreat — partial or full — but if somebody’s going to be objective about it, I think you’re right that nobody else was talking about these matters, and, as has turned out over the past few decades, the “party line,” the publishing, was prescient, and in good faith.

Frank Furedi has written about this more than almost anyone, in a consistent way. It wasn’t necessarily manufactured as just a turn away from the working class after the Party disbanded, because that’s an accusation I feared: that, as the Party disbanded, it needed to justify itself, and this “turn” was part of that, as “Eurocommunism” previously was a turn. That’s open for debate. I still think that despite its having developed into something else since, it was all done in good faith, necessary, and correct. My one criticism is that it has become far more of a sociological, cultural critique than a political one. In fact, it’s a major problem; it’s become obsessive, almost myopic, which is worrying.

MA: I want to ask about the party question. It seems from everything you’ve said that the idea of the party for the RCP was simply inherited from orthodox Marxism: the necessity of the party for the political organization of the working class. To what extent did that change or come into crisis